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“*Redefining Blackness: April Bey*,” by JK Turner for The Undefeated, August 25, 2020.



## Redefining Blackness: April Bey

*The Undefeated features contemporary Black visual artists to examine how they are redefining Blackness*



APRIL BEY

**Mixed media artist, tenured art professor, Glendale Community College; Los Angeles**

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As a working artist, Los Angeles-based April Bey uses mixed media to invent worlds of imagination that challenge viewers to examine their own preconceptions about humanity, race and the hiding-in-plain-sight remnants of global colonialism, white supremacy in particular. She is also a tenured professor at Glendale Community College, where she encourages her art students to share their life experiences through their creations while reminding them to seek knowledge independent of the classroom or studio, lessons that she had to teach herself during her own art education at Ball State University and California State University, Northridge.

Bey’s upbringing and early education in her native Bahamas instill her work with a colorful vibrancy that might seem at odds with the serious and sometimes controversial themes her art explores, such as implicit bias, feminism, sexuality and racism — both overt and covert.

The Undefeated spoke with Bey about her art, her teaching and how she tries to use art to redefine Blackness in 2020 and beyond.

**How do you as a Black mixed media artist want to redefine Blackness in the modern world?**

I have a hard time accessing art made that reflects Black pain and suffering now because all I can think about are the aesthetics of what the future could look like. If artists don’t start building that aesthetic now, how can we realize it in real life? Black death and suffering aren’t designed into my future, so I don’t want it illustrated in my present and especially so, my art. I’ve memorized it. I’ve mastered it. It’s redundant and overdone. My artist’s response to what’s going on right now isn’t to show victims, but to show power dynamics destroyed and radically alien views from another planet where people who may be seen as less than here [on Earth] are more than there. There being the future. There being Atlantica.

Atlantica was once a nameless planet and detailed fabrication told to me by my Black father as a way to explain racism and colorism — why I looked different than my mother, who was white, and why children at school made fun of my hair that stood up instead of laying down. He told me we would always be different because we were aliens sent from another planet to observe and report on Earth. I call this planet Atlantica.

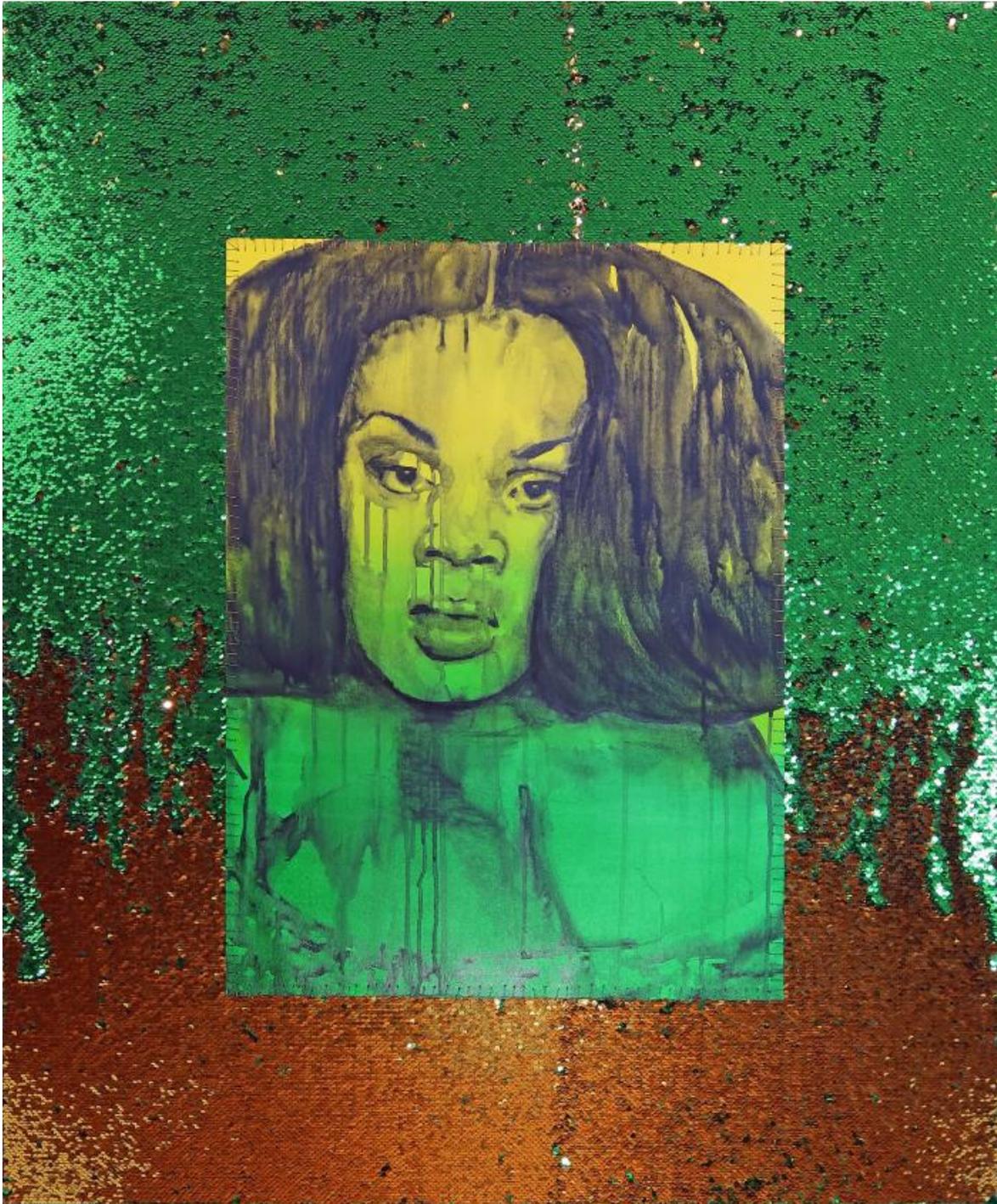
Atlantica is the therapeutic manifestation of April Bey — her origin story and a surreal coping mechanism to deal with existence as a queer Black femme on Earth.

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Jervae From The Gilda Region. APRIL BEY

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**Before we discuss them individually, describe how the pieces we have from your *Atlantica* series redefine Blackness in today’s climate.**

These works accomplish a redefinition of Blackness in today’s climate by removing today’s climate entirely and imagining a futurist depiction of Black people freed from labels, colonialism and white supremacy.

**Tell me about *Astra From The Gilda Region (Purple and Gold)* and *Jervae From The Gilda Region (Green and Gold)*. Are they a set?**

I work in multiples of two for several reasons. The first one is always a stressful calculation. Mistakes happen, but happy moments of success happen too. Then the second one is pure joy after struggling through the first.

This series has two of our deities from *Atlantica*. They also keep me going daily [here on Earth] with their words, work and art. I love my Gods dearly. I first converted to @jervae when she did a cover of a mantra spoken into existence by @funkychunkyy [Astra].

**Your [installation #Gradient](#) depicted a color scale from black to light brown or tan, with words surrounding the colors that describe many of the implicit biases based in colorism – dark tones as aggressive or abrasive, lighter tones as honest or nice. As a lighter-skinned Black woman, have those implicit biases affected you personally, and, if so, how is that expressed in your artwork?**

That piece had words that were used to describe me in emails at my college that I taught at. The point of the piece was that we have these colorist biases, but when you strip them down, they’re tied to being Black. So you can be light-skinned and people will still say you’re aggressive because you’re not white. In my work, I describe myself as a virus, which is ironic right now. I like to infect people, especially white people in white spaces, with thinking I’m the friendly Negro. [Playful voice.] ‘Look, a Black person and a white person came together to make me, and look at how sweet and soft I am!’ Then once they let me in, I hire all of my Black friends and I completely shut down the diversity committee. The second I got tenure, I blew everything up at my school. That’s the only way to do things sometimes. You have to slip in and start shutting down the host from the inside out.

With #Gradient, I wanted to narrow in on the aesthetics that someone decided to write down and say, ‘this is what makes a Black person Black, this is what makes a white person white,’ and how absurd those aesthetics are.

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***Describe My Fans Be My True Friends! (Colonial Criminalization of Homosexuality).***

This piece is based on a song by Wanlov the Kubolor and his band FOKN Bois, based in Ghana [watch

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the [music video here](#)]. Ghana, like the Bahamas, where I grew up, still holds archaic British colonial laws criminalizing homosexuality.

*My Fans Be My True Friends! [Colonial Criminalization of Homosexuality]* represents a fictitious advertisement from the planet Atlantica for Colonial Swag, which is a high-fashion luxury brand on Atlantica that uses fully sustainable, ethically mined colonialism from Earth’s developing countries to create beautiful, priceless pieces of fashion. I chose to use Wanlov the Kubolor as muse because of their work on decolonizing spaces and bringing awareness to the ways postcolonial societies are still dealing with colonialism.

This piece pulls into question notions about gender binaries and sexual orientation while confronting who holds the power to create these rules to begin with. In Africa, the Caribbean and other postcolonial cultures, Blackness is still very much defined by old and dying colonial protocols designed to oppress and maintain white supremacy. This work shows a futuristic representation of how Blackness will evolve when systems of oppression are destroyed or, in the case of my work, used and turned into empowering fully sustainable high-fashion alien wear.

**Outside of the *Atlantica* series, you’ve used hair relaxer as a medium in some of your art [installations](#) ([Creamy Crack](#), [Picky Head](#), [Dark and Lovely](#)). How do today’s attitudes toward Black hair fit into your redefinition of Blackness?**

My master’s thesis was titled *The Millennial Natural Hair Movement*. Going natural is something that’s cyclical in the Black community all over the world. It happens every 10 years or so, but I wanted to see how people my age were doing it. They were doing it on YouTube. They were showing themselves cutting their hair and then sharing all of the wins and disasters that came along with it.

That space has completely redefined Blackness, not just for my generation, but for just about every generation. On social media, people have entire businesses that they started on social media. Some of the women that I studied when I first started that project were making videos in their bathrooms and now they’re multimillionaires with hair lines all around the world.

Redefining Blackness right now for me is taking futurist approaches to circumvent obstacles that are here in the present, and social media is doing that incredibly well.

**Were those pieces created to address white people’s obsession with controlling Black hair, or Black people’s obsession with having “good hair”?**

Both. It started with a mantra, sentiment hinders function. It’s the idea of tearing down traditions that no longer function. My grandma told me I needed to relax my hair, and when I did research I discovered

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that it was invented mainly as a way for freed Black men to integrate into white working society. I researched the chemical makeup of it and how toxic it actually is.

Black women, here anyway, can be natural and not get sent home. We're very privileged. In the Bahamas, girls still have to wear certain hairstyles in the schools, and in Africa girls still can't have long hair in schools — they have to shave their heads. It's all related to colonialism, to the white colonists not wanting the help to be 'too Black' around their children or their guests. It's within the same discourse as hair wraps or straightening your hair to look as close to the Western ideals of beauty, which is white, cis, het ... colonialists.

**In 2014-15, you taught a course called *Pretty Hurts* that caused some controversy among some feminists and Beyoncé fans for its course description. In [a blog response](#) to a critical [MTV.com article](#) you and your co-instructor wrote, “The aim of this course is to analyze how artists, Jay-Z included, define themselves and their work.” With the lessons you learned from that controversy and the life experience you've gained in the years since, how do you currently define yourself and your work?**

It was a long time ago, but my views haven't changed. The reason I wanted to teach that class about Beyoncé and feminism is because no one wants to include Black women in that conversation. At the time, it was mostly white women who were upset about the class, which was proving my point. I identify as a Black, queer, fem, womanist. I identify more with womanism because I think feminism has a high probability of being extremely toxic. The feminist conversations that are happening in this country hold no interest for me at all. My interest is in global feminism. We're very privileged to be able to do and say what we want, and there are so many women around the world that can't, and that means to me that the work isn't done.

A lot of movements, especially ones started by white people because initially they also want to benefit from it, it stops once they do. So, with Beyoncé, the conversation was about decolonizing movements. A lot of people were making commentary on Beyoncé and whether she could be a feminist or not; they were using her body and the way she presents feminism as being problematic. My point is: Whose problem? Make a list of everything that's right and wrong with Beyoncé and then I want you to source that list and see who's the author. Who said that? My point is that whoever said it is still colonizing our minds and the way we think.

The class was supposed to derail and decolonize that, particularly for where it was being taught [ArtCenter College of Design] because the school was notorious for only hiring white men to teach. That's why Beyoncé's people even contacted the school because they thought some white guy was teaching the class!

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**Your bio describes your artwork in part as “a critique of ... post-colonialism and constructs of race within white supremacist systems.” How did your upbringing and experiences in the Caribbean, where the emblems and iconography of colonialism are much more prevalent than in the mainland United States, inform your art and your interpretation of Blackness in a postcolonial world?**

My experience is that of someone who grew up around Blackness all the time. Our nurses, our doctors, our lawyers, our police officers ... I grew up in a Black nation. Coming here to the U.S. was kind of a shock, mainly because I had to ask permission for things I didn't have to get permission for before. I didn't have the freedom I had before, and it was never blatantly explained to me why. When I started college, something I focused on was to understand why there are Black people here that have to live a lot differently than Black people elsewhere, and through that research, you have no choice but to come into colonialism.

That led me to travel to West Africa, where those countries were also colonized by the British. So, in my work, I like to connect that colonization throughout the diaspora because, they're all different lands, but the route and the entities that colonized do the same things and they leave the same remnants and create the same culture.

**Like you, I got a fine arts degree from a predominantly white university, and as far as I remember, I was the only Black person in the art department at that time. How did your art education at Ball State and Cal State Northridge shape the ways you express your Blackness through your art?**

In undergrad, I was the only Black student. That helped me understand how racism is in America in that, for me, it was mostly my advisers and teachers that were really discriminatory. I remember in undergrad three different classes where three different professors held me back after class because they didn't believe that I wrote a paper. One of them was a history professor and we had to write a paper on Voltaire's *Candide*. I'll never forget that stupid book because I hated it, and I wrote about hating it, but I wrote in a way that he didn't expect me to write. He accused me of taking it from a critic's website, and I was like, 'No! I hated the book!' He made me sit there and basically recite the whole book to him and then he was like, 'Oh, you're a really good writer.' And that was it.

America made me feel embarrassed to be anything other than what they defined as Black, whereas in the Caribbean if I had written a paper like that the teacher would have said [in Bahamian accent], 'Well, you could have done better!' I had to learn that very slowly and painfully. For example, I would find a mentor and whenever I did better than they expected, they would do something or say something or refuse something to put me back in my place. It was like they had to remind me that, 'I'm the one that's responsible for your success, not you. I'm the good, liberal person that drives a Prius and I'm helping

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you. So you need to give me my praise and make sure you know your place. You could never be bigger than me.’

In grad school, I did a lot of independent reading because I didn’t trust what my teachers were telling me. I’d made it to grad school and never heard of a Black artist, and had definitely never had a Black professor. Coming from a country where everyone’s Black to here, where there’s none of that in the curriculum at all, it forced me to start learning in the streets, so to speak. If you only learn what they give you, you’re going to miss your whole history.

**You’re an art educator now. Do you encourage your students to express their racial or national pride through their artwork, and if so, how?**

I do a lot of contemporary art studies where students have to study artists that are like them. I have a high Latinx and Armenian population of students that I teach. As a matter of fact, the white student is a minority in my class because I teach at a community college.

I show them queer artists and Middle Eastern artists and Black artists, and because all of those artists make art about their life experience and their culture, the students then have to figure out a way to emulate it using their own background. When I was in art school, I had a problem with feeling like I had to rationalize myself to people who created all of these rules. They said I used too much color in my work, so I started doing black and white work and it was awful. When I went home for Christmas, I realized that my house was Pepto-Bismol pink and my neighbor’s house was teal and another house was purple, so I knew why I used so much color — I grew up with it.

Once I used that as my justification, the people who were bullying me into changing my aesthetic couldn’t really argue with my culture and background. That’s when I realized that being the author of your experience is sometimes the only authority that we have. Teaching my students that early on in their work helps them get through all of the critics who will tear you down for doing what you do innately.